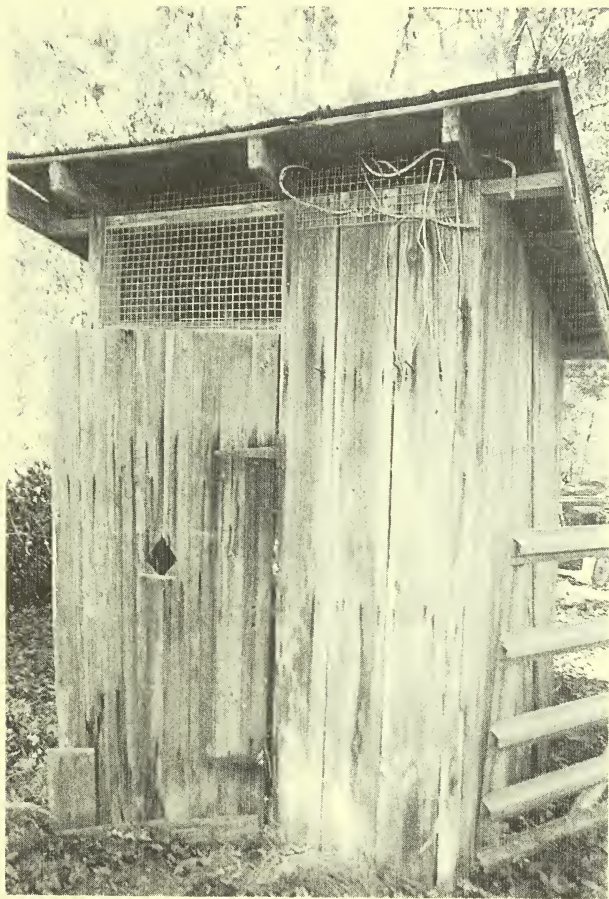


# SEFER



# 1999

## *ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS*

The staff of the *Sefer* would like to express their gratitude for the help and assistance of the following persons:

Dr. Nancy Barendse  
Dr. Carol Drowota  
Professor Anne Hawkes  
Jan Joslin  
The Department of English

Cover Photo:  
“Passing Time” by Lili Gresham

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*According to the Analytical Concordance to the Bible, the word "sefer" is taken from the Hebrew and means "writing" or "book."*

## Reflections of a Pensive Poet

Had my mother not fallen on society's stage, acting in Someone's play,  
Designed to inspire fantastic and frightening images and phrases in an infant son,  
And had my father not found refuge and freedom in escape,  
Would I have heard and written the word "nevermore,"  
Now forevermore chained and stored in the catacombs of men's minds?  
Had I received the grace-granted love given to all children,  
And had I not begged a false father for his despondent attentions—  
Attentions that he could not even give his wife, my make-shift mother—  
Would others have read how my pen and heart bled  
For cold maids and un-dead maidens  
Whose love was as temporary and temperate?  
Could I have ever told of the tens of thousands of tortures which tormented me  
When I could not feed my devoted aunt-mother and dying cousin-wife?  
What unnamed fiends found my mind and made a home  
Where cold and solitude were my only companions?  
My mind was ravened, black and stark,  
Scattered with words ushered there by Deprivation and Devastation.  
I wonder had I been prosperity's son,  
Would I have heard the haunting, dark verses  
Which left my fissured mind weak and unstable,  
Or would I have heard some chirp-word from some blue bird,  
Never to be heard from or remembered again?  
I can't remember now if the alcohol was my favored, fancied friend,  
Or if it was a necessary nurse to help mend my menaced memories.  
My heart told me unspeakable tales others' hearts could not even hear.  
My pen pictured devils and Death, Pits and predicaments, Bugs and bitter birds.  
It chronicled Mysteries and Masques, Murders and Morgues, and beasts and  
burials.  
Was my grief worth the token gold?  
Was my piece of fame worth my loss of peace?  
Did the boy belong to the black bird before he ever heard the words  
Pick and peck at his head until the vowels were vented  
And the consonants were consecrated onto the page?

*Vicki Wilkerson Sweatman*

## **Blinders**

Through the window  
To the city streets below  
Peering through closed blinds  
The world outside awaits her  
Will she answer its call  
Face the bitter cold  
Bravely with her head held high  
Or will she swipe the haze  
With a spread palm on the glass  
Close her eyes and turn away  
Until the window again turns misty  
Hiding its reflections.

*Heather Pipkin*

## **Prevarication**

I lie.

I lie  
To make amends  
With my past.  
Sins, Forgiven by God  
Unforgiven by man.  
A little white lie  
Covers even  
The blackest of sins . . .  
Doesn't it?

*Heather Pipkin*

**pedagogy**

\*dedicated to madame anne tracy

not a simple art  
but relentless  
a pursuit

not a mundane task  
but professional  
a dream

not illogical  
but sensitive  
impressionable

the music of her words  
a challenge  
to mimic  
yet  
to aspire

*Valerie Clemens*



## The Wedding Guest

I walked alone through the doorway of the large stone church. Away from the chilly November air, but feeling very uncomfortable, I paused to look around me. The atmosphere was more festive than what I recalled of the Sunday services that I attended as a child. People were standing around talking with one another about the impending wedding as I walked in the church's sparsely furnished foyer. Nodding to the few people I knew, I quickly signed my name into the register and, not wanting to speak to anyone, I quickly headed for the church proper.

"Bride or groom?" asked one of the tuxedoed ushers as I approached.

I hesitated, not knowing how to answer. "The bride," I replied after a moment. He motioned toward the left aisle, and I went inside.

The vaulted ceiling and stained glass windows loomed ominously over me. Gazing up at the oversized religious paintings and statues, I felt small, like facing Goliath without a sling. The wooden pews looked as if they could hold about two hundred, but they were only three-quarters full. I sat in the back row of the room, hoping to be inconspicuous. My view of the altar was somewhat obstructed, but it was not Peter standing up front that I came to see.

As the wedding processional began to play, my heart rose to my throat, thumping loudly. By sheer will alone, I prevented myself from coughing and drawing unwanted attention upon me. At the first step of her march to matrimony, Christine's head turned to the left, and she stared directly at me. Her smile was so stunning that I forgot about my heart completely. That brief glance stopped time. It spoke more than we had said to each other in the past five years. I smiled nervously. She beamed.

The service began, and I sat back to watch. As they exchanged their vows, my head filled with the voice of Father Patrick from a long time ago saying the words of the tenth commandment—ending in, "And God commanded that each of you shall obey his commandments." Their exchange of vows only made his voice echo more.

Before I realized it, they were presented as man and wife. Following their exit, the other observers began to trickle out. I glanced at my watch and found that less than an hour had elapsed since I arrived. I waited until I was the only one left before heading out of the great hall. It was a great relief to return to a normal room with normal walls, though the foyer was overcrowded with well-wishers.

The gallery of greetings moved slowly. At each stop, I shook hands and paid my compliments, introducing myself to those I did not know. I said hello and congratulations to both of their parents, promising to catch them up on where I'd been later. They each smiled congenially at me, not knowing what to think of my presence at the wedding. As I continued down the line, I constantly watched the newlyweds at the front. Peter hadn't lost anything with age. His



rich black hair and broad shoulders made him look as comfortable in a tuxedo as when he wore his baseball cap and cleats. I proceeded in a daze, until I was finally in front of him. He stopped me and hugged me so hard that my feet left the ground. For a moment, I thought I could feel his wedding ring knifing into the small of my back. As he released me, he stepped back and commented on the amount of gray that mottled my head. I reminded him that he was only six months younger than I and then offered my congratulations. I promised to have a drink with him at the reception and then moved to Christine.

In the bright lights of the foyer, she was even more stunning than before she had spoken her vows. Her amber hair and green eyes contrasted with the white of her gown in a way that was both alluring and elegant. With her in heels, we stood eye to eye, staring at one another for a few seconds. Regaining my composure and breathing deeply, we casually embraced. I kissed her cheek and stammered out, "Best wishes."

"Thanks for coming, Jude. It's great seeing you again," she said while stepping back to look me over. Outwardly, she hadn't changed a bit since we were last together.

"It's nice to see you guys again, too," was all I could reply before Peter interrupted us to whisk her away for pictures.

"We'll see you at the reception, old man," he remarked as they departed. Christine continued to look back until they turned the corner of the church and were out of sight. Rather than stand around waiting or talking, I departed for the reception.

I took my time driving to the reception, alone with my thoughts and the sound of David Sanborn's sax ringing through the rental car. My mind raced back to distant memories I did not wish to recall. I tried drowning them out of my head with the stereo, but all my efforts were wasted. The image of her walking down the aisle in white mingled with that of another aisle and her in black—the last time we were together—at her college graduation. I had nothing to show for my years in between, but I knew about hers from mutual friends. It was inevitable that she would marry Peter, though they really began dating only a year ago. He was popular. He made good money and lived the fast life. He was everything I could never be. I couldn't even remember why Peter and I were ever such close friends.

In the parking lot of the reception hall, I leaned on my car to have a cigarette and clear my head before entering. The night was brisk, but I found the cold refreshing. I noticed that the lot was pretty full as I stood there watching the other guests arrive two-by-two and scurry inside to escape from the cold. After I finished my cigarette, I slowly walked toward the hall. I was reluctant to enter, but more reluctant to leave.

I crossed the threshold of the building and looked around. The decorations, though elegantly arranged, assaulted me from every direction. White streamers and bouquets of white flowers encircled the room, clashing with the

red carpet and dark wood furniture. One wall displayed a few inexpensive nature prints housed in similarly cheap frames. The opposite wall presented an imitation Victorian table that held the registry book. Next to the table stood a large, gold framed picture of Christine in her wedding gown. I thought she looked beautiful, but not happy, being framed for posterity. As I walked across the parlor to get to the main room, her eyes appeared to follow me. I stopped twice to look back and make sure.

The inner room continued with the decorating style of common matrimony, but, filled with people, the room did not appear so ominous. I must have missed the entrance of the wedding party because they were already inside. The crowd had doubled in size from the church, and everyone was talking, drinking, and smiling. My mind called for a drink before talking, and my legs responded by carrying me toward the bar. However, I had walked only a few steps before Peter approached me and pulled me along for the rest of the way.

"Two Dewars on the rocks. Make them doubles," he told the bartender and then turned to look at me. "It's been way too long. You still drink the Scotch like we used too?"

"Yeah. Been almost five years, hasn't it?" I replied.

"Almost six and not a word from you except at Christmas. It really upsets Christine that we haven't kept in contact. I think she secretly still wants you."

I just stared.

As Peter spoke, he continued to look around the room, always smiling and sometimes offering a polite wave. When the drinks came, he drank half of his immediately and then offered a toast. "To beautiful women, good Scotch, and old friends. Just like old times," he said, and we tapped our glasses together. Eyeing me warily, he continued to speak. "Christine has a lot of single friends here tonight, Jude. I arranged for you to be at the table next to ours with four of the hottest, most eligible ones here. Christine didn't think you'd feel comfortable there, but I knew better. Her cousin Jessie is definitely the pick of the litter. Hook up with her, and we can compare notes tomorrow." He then finished the rest of his drink and said we would talk more later as he slugged me in the shoulder.

After he walked away, I set down my drink untouched and asked the bartender for a soda. Christine was making her rounds about the room, and I realized that I shouldn't have come. It would be impossible for me to talk to her alone, and even if I could, I didn't know what I would say. After the bartender handed me my drink, I walked over to the table where I was assigned and sat down.

I just made myself comfortable when my dinner companions arrived. I stood and politely introduced myself to each of them. They each seemed like really nice girls, and they were certainly attractive, but nothing like what I was interested in. I resigned myself to be polite and then quietly slip out after dinner. After the introductions, they all left to go visit friends, except for Jessie.

We sat down, and she began to tell me how Peter had told her all about me. I was surprised, but I tried not to show it. I just continued being polite while she carried the entire conversation. She spoke on and on about what a wonderful guy Peter was and how happy she was for him. I thought it curious she did not mention Christine, but I didn't ask. While she talked, I watched Christine continue to float from guest to guest.

Dinner arrived before Christine and I could talk. All she managed was a small wave as she moved toward her table. The other girls rejoined us, and we all began to eat. I was thankful that little was said during the dinner, but once we were done, Peter and I became the topic of discussion at the table. When asked how I knew Peter, I told them about being roommates at college. They asked if I was an engineer like Peter. I told them that I had the same degree.

"Jude and Christine dated all through college," Jessie informed them. I tried not to react, but their reaction was obvious. Fortunately, we sat only for another moment before the dancing began.

Excusing myself to nobody in particular, I left the room just as Christine and Peter began their first dance together as man and wife. I stood in the lobby, starting to smoke a cigarette and thinking about leaving. Jessie joined me before too long. She entered the foyer like a model showing off the thin evening gown she wore. Flipping her long, red hair off her shoulder, she made a comment about the meal and asked me for a light. Neither of us said anything again for about half a cigarette.

"Do you have any plans after the reception?" she asked, breaking the silence. "I thought that maybe we could go have a drink or something."

I paused a moment, exhaled, and then replied, "No, but thanks for the offer. I think I'll just be going to my hotel and getting some sleep. I'm pretty tired from traveling, and I'm supposed to meet some friends early tomorrow morning."

She snuffed out her cigarette and said, "Well, let me know if you change your mind." Then she turned and sauntered back inside. I couldn't tell if she was insulted or disappointed. I didn't care.

I finished my cigarette and walked back inside. I was leaning against the bar, sipping on a new glass of soda, when Christine motioned from the dance floor for me to join her. Looking around, I saw Peter talking and drinking with a group of his friends, and figured, "Why not?" I set my glass down and walked to where Christine was waiting.

Berlin's "Take My Breath Away" began to play, reminding me of our college years. As we danced, I looked into her green eyes and remembered the first time we danced together. She still had my heart on a string. It seemed as if we were in a vacuum; the crowd quieted, the music softened, and nobody noticed this transformation but us.

"You look wonderful," I said.

"Thanks, but I don't believe you," she replied.

"I'm serious," I told her. "You are just as I remembered. If I didn't know better, I would think you were still twenty-five."

"You always had a way with words, Jude. Do you still write poetry?"

"No," I said while staring at the floor. "I haven't written a word since the last time I saw you—just before I left for California." I watched her face while we danced, but she had her eyes on Peter. He was talking to Jessie and was closer to her than a married man should be. "He hasn't changed much, has he?" I said.

"He has in a lot of ways, but I'm worried that he's still the same old Peter. We had several fights about it in the last couple of months," she said as she returned her gaze to me. "I called the wedding off once because I thought he was having an affair. We didn't talk for almost two weeks, but I gave in."

I was speechless. Her hand pressed a little harder against my back, and we moved to the other side of the dance floor. Her eyes were teary, but she quickly composed herself. After crossing the floor, her father tapped on my shoulder and asked, in a coarse manner, if he could cut in. I said, "Of course," and she smiled at me as they began to move away.

As I walked back to the bar, I saw Peter walk into the foyer with Jessie by his side. I sipped my drink and reminded myself that I was the one who had lost. I was the one who had moved away. I was the one still driving an old Mercury and pretending to be a writer. It was none of my business. Picking up my drink, I walked out to have a cigarette. It wasn't surprising to find the foyer empty.

A little later, when the time came for them to cut the cake, Peter and Jessie had returned to the party. I figured that it would be best if I left.

Driving back to the hotel my mind was blank. I refused to allow myself an opportunity to think. About a block from my hotel, I stopped at a bar thinking of diluting my conscience with Scotch until it closed. After an indeterminate amount of time had passed, I left without having touched a glass. Once I was back in my room, the darkness comforted me. I did not turn on the lights for fear of seeing my reflection in the mirror.

*Mouin N. Sayegh, Jr.*

### 3000 Reasons to Say Yes

I had it in my mind  
To lie here and sell my soul,  
To give all that I had  
If only for one moment.  
But the sun never shone  
And the smell was never home.  
The leaves were always green  
Forsaking autumn's show.  
How can I speak to the teacher,  
When my knees are always scraped?

I had it in my mind  
Not to fall this time  
Or that,  
Into the large puddle  
Soaked and covered in mud.  
The smell of rain  
Dripping from my hair,  
And clinging to my fingers  
Reminded me of hunger.

I had it in my mind  
To laugh my way to heaven,  
To sing with angels,  
The dazzling creatures  
Falling like snow,  
Landing lightly  
Without a sound.

I had it in my mind  
To fall asleep  
Beneath a bright moon,  
Crystal and sharp.  
Falling into a slumber  
Awakened only inside  
Of innocence.

I had it in my mind  
To be the last  
Surviving member  
Of an old race  
Who never died,  
Just smoldered  
Beneath the  
Pristine surface.

*Phillip Stein*

## The Waking of the Sleepy Town

A cloud surrounds the sleepy town as rain drops to the ground.  
The sun sinks low beneath the trees, clearing way for the evening breeze.  
Cracks slowly take shape deep within the sky.  
Lightning pierces the earth from up on high.

The townsfolk race to find their children playing in the fields.  
Dragged by their arms, they try to keep up—  
Stepping on their parents' heels.  
Black funnels dance upon the hills, pushing toward the town.  
A hush falls over them as they listen to the overwhelming sound.  
Beneath the ground, they find shelter, and stay there for the night,  
While the storm destroys their homes and their lives.

In the morn, the sun pried open their eyes.  
They woke to find an emptiness within the sky.  
As they freed themselves from their underground prison,  
All they could see was eternal horizon.  
They weakly fell to their knees and sighed.  
And thanked God for sparing their lives.

*Kyle Stanley*

## Love Realists

Is there really love in this world  
—True Love?  
Not sexual feelings  
Or dirty minds,  
But that which binds  
A man's and woman's heart together.  
Where can it be found?  
—Under the old oak tree?  
Or on the picnic basket in the park?  
Can it be found on a bicycle-built-for-two?  
Or in the Italian restaurant on the corner?

If there really is true love in this world,  
It's not in any of these places.

It can only be found  
In the hearts and souls of its believers.

*Katrina Helton*



## Without Worldly Restraints

To be without world-restraints:

Interactive energy  
Flowing, shifting, embodying, consoling.  
Consuming only to improve  
Rejecting excremental reduction.

Energies displace –  
One becoming the other –  
You are born in me  
And I in you

Oneness stronger than two,  
Egocentricity excluded.

*Sherry Yearty*

## Stars over Charleston

"There aren't any stars in Charleston tonight," I said as I set the bags of groceries on the counter. Andrew turned from the open refrigerator.

"You look surprised," he said before chomping down on a chicken leg. "Are there ever?"

"Sometimes, when there aren't many clouds and the wind blows the smoke from the papermill away from here. But tonight's pretty cloudy." I started putting the groceries away, and Andrew sat on the counter to finish his chicken.

"There are too many lights in the city. They block the stars. Did you get everything you needed?"

"I think so. The grocery store was packed. It was like the mall on Christmas Eve. How was Karen? Did she give you any trouble?"

Andrew smiled, and I knew his answer even before he told me. "Connie, you know she never gives me any trouble. She's the best four-year-old I know. I think she fell asleep watching cartoons on the TV. You want me to move her to her bed for you?"

"No, I can move her. She's not heavy. Did she tell you about her preschool taking a field trip to Waterfront Park?"

"Yeah. I have to give credit to her teachers. They sure are brave taking twenty little kids downtown. Well, I have to get going. I need to pack before I go to bed. What plans do you and Karen have for this weekend?"

"Joel's coming over tomorrow. I told him Karen and I had a really long week and didn't feel like riding over to Savannah, so if he wanted to see her he'd have to come over here. What are you doing this weekend?" As he told me of his plans to visit his family, I thought about the differences between him and Joel. At one time, Joel had been the love of my life, everything I ever dreamed of in a man. He had a way of making me feel like I was the only woman in the world. Meeting our last year in college, we continued to date even after he moved to Savannah to open his shop. Joel was an artist, and it showed in every area of his life. He did good business in Savannah with all the tourists. His paintings were really great—he had an amazing talent. Things had been so wonderful back then. I guess if it weren't for Joel I never would have met Andrew. He was a paralegal in the attorney's office I went to when I found out I was pregnant. I wanted to know what rights Joel had as the father, even though we weren't married. Andrew and I went out a few times, but nothing romantic ever clicked. I just wasn't looking for another relationship then, and he understood that. But Karen just fell in love with him.

My thoughts were suddenly broken by the jingle of car keys. "Well, it's getting late, and I still have to pack. I'll call later this weekend when I get back."

"O.K. Drive careful." I locked the door behind Andrew but kept my hand

on the lock. I continued to think about Andrew and how the three of us would go to hockey games, festivals around the city, college sporting events, and even went to visit his family in Spartanburg a few times. They treated Karen and me like part of the family. Andrew now had his degree in law and was practicing in a small firm downtown. Tired of thinking, I yawned, switched off the kitchen light, and headed into the living room.

The glow from the television screen cast soft, colored lights onto Karen's face. She looked like a China doll, sleeping peacefully with her head propped up on a pillow. I turned off the TV, gently picked her up, and carried her to her room. I got her dressed for bed without waking her, an art I had perfected over the years. I almost went into a trance listening to her soft breathing. She had not been planned—she was a mistake. But I had a hard time remembering life before her, and I couldn't even imagine a life without her. I had to leave the room in order to resist the urge to pick her up again and make sure it wasn't all a dream.

After changing into my nightgown, I climbed into my bed and turned off the lamp. I breathed a deep sigh of relief as I remembered that tomorrow was Saturday and my only work for the day was being polite to Joel.

"Mommy? Mommy, are you awake?" I opened my eyes to see a curly brown-haired girl with bright green eyes standing before me. Smiling and showing her dimples, she asked, "Will you watch 'toons with me?"

I answered, "Of course," and she climbed into bed with me. I reached for the remote and turned on the TV across the room.

During the last commercial break of *The Bugs Bunny and Tweety Show*, I reached over and brushed her hair from her eyes. "Daddy's coming over today," I reminded her.

"When? What are we going to do?" she asked, without turning her eyes from the screen.

"Whatever you want to do."

"Can we go back to the park I went to yesterday with my class? We had lots of fun. And maybe me and you and Daddy can ride on the wagon behind the horse." She looked at me this time, nodding her head through every sentence.

"The wagon is called a carriage," I told her. "That's fine with me. Tell your father when he gets here. Are you ready to eat breakfast?"

"Yes."

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"That's better." With that, we headed into the kitchen.

I tried to be polite when Joel arrived. Sometimes that's hard when I start thinking of our past. I was picking things up and getting the apartment straightened. Watching me move and arrange, Joel laughed suddenly. Predictably, it annoyed me.

"So you're still a bit obsessive-compulsive, I see. Good to know some things never change. Sorry I'm a little late. Traffic on the interstate was murderous."

"Welcome to Charleston. How's work going?"

"Not too bad. Business was heavy this week. Here's a check for you."

With a suspicious eyebrow raised, I looked up from the check. "More than usual?"

"I know how hard you've been working, and I wanted you to have extra to spend on something nice for you or Karen."

"Thanks. She's in her room. She got a new dollhouse this week, and so it gets all her attention now." Moments later, I heard a squeal of delight and knew Joel was swinging Karen in a circle. Karen came running from her room and began jumping up and down beside me.

"Daddy says we can go to the park! Can we go now, Mom?"

"Sure. Go get your shoes."

The weather was perfect—a springtime breeze was blowing and the sky was a dazzling blue, dotted with fluffy clouds. Karen rode on Joel's back as we walked through the park. An elderly lady smiled at us as she passed by and told us how beautiful our daughter was. For a moment we were a real family. When Karen got down to collect acorns from under an oak tree, Joel and I rested on a park bench.

"So how's your friend?"

"Andrew? He's fine. He went to visit his family this weekend." I was surprised when Joel asked. He really doesn't like Andrew. Probably because Andrew spends more time with Karen than he does. "You know what she asked Andrew earlier this week? She asked him if he would be her daddy." The expected look of shock and anger passed over Joel's face.

"She already has a daddy."

"That's what he told her. She said she wanted him to be her all-the-time daddy."

"So what are you saying? You two getting married now?"

"No. You know there's nothing between us. I just wanted you to know that Karen wants to have someone around all the time to be her dad. She's not happy with seeing you only weekends."

I could tell he was thinking by the way he stared at the ground. Karen broke the silence by running back to us with a handful of acorns, begging us to let her take them home.

The rest of the afternoon flew by like the clouds above. After Joel left that night and Karen was in bed, I was able to sit down in my room and think. I happened to look at the picture on the wall opposite my bed. Joel had painted it for me for our one-year anniversary. It was of a young woman wearing a red sundress, kneeling in a field of daisies. She was facing the side and looking

down, and her hair covered her face. A blazing blue sky framed her as she picked a bouquet of flowers. Joel had titled it "Annabelle Lee." He had it on display in his shop before he gave it to me, and many customers asked if they could buy a copy. But he said it was an original, and there was only one. I remembered how I cried when he gave it to me—I had never received a more beautiful gift.

I did my routine Friday night grocery shopping while Andrew watched Karen. When I returned, the two were watching cartoons and eating ice cream. I armed myself with a spoon, sat beside them on the couch, and joined in on the feast.

"Anyone call?"

"Yeah. Your mom called and wanted to know if you were going to the family reunion this summer in Georgia. I told her I didn't know and that you'd call her back tomorrow morning. And about fifteen minutes ago Joel called. He left a number for you to call him back." The last two sentences were colder than the ice cream.

"This is a local number. I wonder where he is?"

"Didn't say, didn't ask. Just told me to have you call."

I dialed the number, and in three rings he answered. "Where are you?" I blurted, almost rudely. A few weeks had passed since Joel's last visit. We had gone once since then to see him in Savannah.

"In my new shop."

"Here in Charleston?"

"Yes."

"You're going to drive from Savannah to Charleston every day?"

"No. The second floor is an apartment, so I've moved here. I got to thinking about Karen needing an all-the-time dad, and so I knew I had to move if I was going to be that dad. I want you to come over and see the picture I've been working on."

"Right now? It's almost nine o'clock."

"So? Andrew's over there, isn't he? Let him watch Karen for a few more minutes."

"All right. Where are you?"

Driving downtown, I couldn't believe what I was doing. And I couldn't believe Joel was actually serious. He must have gone insane.

I arrived at the shop and looked around. By the looks of the room, he had just moved in that day. Paintings, supplies, and boxes were everywhere. Only one picture was on an easel, facing the other way.

"You got here pretty quick. It's closer than I thought."

"Traffic was light. Just move in, huh?"

"Wednesday. I started this painting about a week ago, but I've been working nonstop on it since yesterday. I think I've got it finished. Come look."

I walked around to the front of the painting. It was of two young people, sitting on a blanket under an oak tree. The man's head was in the woman's lap. He was looking up at her, and her face was turned down to his. It was obvious by the look on their faces they were in love.

"So, what do you think?"

"I think you're an idiot."

"Is that all?"

I looked up at him, but didn't change my emotionless expression. "No. You need to shave."

"When I asked for your opinion, I meant about the painting."

"It reminds me of our picnics at the park. That's why you're an idiot. You do things like this, and it makes me remember all the good times we had. I remember how things were before I got pregnant and you left. And then I want to hate you for it. I want to hate you for reminding me that I love you when I'm trying to forget."

"And the shaving part?"

"Because you look like crap when you haven't shaved for a few days."

There was a long silence as Joel walked across the room and sat down on one of the boxes. "You know I still love you. I remember the first night we went to dinner together. You had your hair pulled back and a black dress on. I had never seen anyone more elegant. You just sparkled. Later that night we went out to the beach, away from the city, and looked at the stars. They were so bright and beautiful. But, there was only one star I really noticed that night. And now she's about as close as those in the sky."

For a moment I just stood there. Then all the anger I had been holding back seemed to jump out of me. "You're the one that said he needed space. You left me, remember? You left me, three months pregnant, to figure out how to balance the world on my shoulders. So I did. And just when I had it all figured out, you came back like nothing had happened and expected me to feel the same. And because you are Karen's father, I allowed it. And now what? You want me to give you a medal for painting a picture?"

"No. I want you to give me another chance. A chance to make up for all the time I've lost. I promise I'm serious about this. That's why I moved here. So I could be close to the two people I love the most. Do you know what I named the picture? *Revelation*. That's what I've had. Last weekend it really hit me how much Karen needs me. Let me prove to you how serious I am. Please?"

When I got back to the apartment, Karen was asleep in bed, and Andrew was watching hockey on ESPN. I sat beside him and recounted what happened with Joel earlier.

Andrew turned to look at me. "And you think he's being serious?"

"Seems to be. He did just pick up and move. He had a good business in Savannah and had no other reason to leave. You know, this morning I looked



in the mirror and realized I've aged ten years since last night. I've worked so hard to support and take good care of Karen. I just want her life to be normal. She needs her daddy. I'm trying to do what's best for her."

"Normal is what you make it, Constance. Besides, he's just going to hurt you again."

"Well, that's a chance I've just got to take."

Weeks passed, Joel lived up to his promises, and things were smoothing out between us. He saw Karen almost every day. Either he would come to our apartment, or we'd go down to his shop. And his business was better here than it had been in Savannah. The front corner of his shop, in front of the window facing the street, was set up for Karen. She had a little easel and her own paints, and on Saturdays she donned her smock and painted her own pictures. Tourists loved it—they'd come in the shop to see Karen and end up buying something of Joel's. Karen even sold a few of hers. Turns out she's a shrewd businesswoman.

Andrew quit coming over as often, and when I asked him about it, he said he just couldn't stand being around Joel. He came over one Saturday evening, but only after calling to make sure Joel wasn't over.

"So how long will you be gone on this trip with him?" Andrew was leaning against the kitchen wall, with *Revelation* hanging on the other side in the living room.

"Probably a week." I was cleaning up around the kitchen, and Andrew was helping himself to the chicken in the fridge. I walked into the living room to pick up the dirty dessert dishes. Walking past *Revelation* on the wall on my way back into the kitchen, I continued, "I think we're going to spend two or three days at Disney World and the other parks, then go to Sea World and maybe a zoo or something. Maybe we'll go to the beach."

"And you feel you're doing the right thing?"

"Yes."

"And what about the reunion?"

"We'll be going to that about a week after we get back. Karen's so excited. She's never had so much going on at one time."

"So when are you leaving?"

"Next Thursday. Traffic will be lighter than if we leave on Friday."

"I still think you're making a big mistake."

"Well, Andrew, I think I'm doing what's best for Karen. If you can't agree with that, I'm sorry."

"Yeah, I am too." And with that, Andrew walked out the door.

After watching the door shut, I walked to the sink to dry the dishes. I looked out of the window above the sink and stared into the dark night at the stars over Charleston.



## Plastic Stars

At first the stars burned luminously,  
Their iridescence  
A surreal illusion of stellar beauty.

In an old wallet  
Hidden beneath some discarded clothing,  
My organ donor card.

My mailbox holds a document:  
Sign here on the dotted line...  
My accidental death insurance policy.

The tires of my car roll  
Through a puddle of spilled blood,  
Leave behind a crimson stencil.  
Disconnected sinew and mud.

Lying in bed  
I gaze up at the ceiling.  
The plastic stars have paled.

*Heather Pipkin*

## No Time

Grayed and aged beyond my acceptance,  
She rocked on her repair-needy porch and watched the waves of  
traffic in town.

I drove by and barely waved to the woman whose life gave mine.  
I gave pathetic excuses for my neglectful abuses as I passed her  
tiny world

Again and again, and again I passed.

I had no time between erratic errands I imagined important at the  
time.

Deliveries and doctors, T-ball and tennis, shopping and supper,  
and summer and winter, and spring and fall kept me busy.

I had no time to listen to ten-times-told tales and how her aged  
body ached and ailed.

I had no time to listen to chitchat I heard as a child—no time to  
exchange a kiss or a smile.

The porch is now repaired, and pansies replace the rocker,  
And I have learned late that it was really she who had no time.

*Vicki Wilkerson Sweatman*

## **Arid Sands**

Arid sands of thought  
Rift, shift formation.  
Prisoner in her desert.

When words were hers  
    She had no thoughts.  
Now thoughts are hers,  
    She has no words.

What she would speak  
To comfort, endear, confront, endure –  
Now die their deaths within.

The fruitful place  
    Is left inarticulate.

So cerebral is her discourse now  
    No participants need be present.

*Sherry Yearty*

## **Before This Began**

Before this began  
I was staring at a blank page.  
On it, there was no writing.  
There was no harmony  
and no attempts at it.  
There were no mistakes,  
no errors,  
no shameful mess.  
There were no statements of love or joy,  
no statements of frustration or regret.  
Nothing I strived to remember,  
Nothing I longed to forget,  
Nothing.  
It was blank and white and clean.  
Most of all, it had potential.  
It had potential to become absolutely anything that this page  
could hold:  
potential for accomplishment,  
for success,  
for praising.  
The emptiness held endless possibilities,  
all within His direction  
and all within my choosing.  
With all this having been said about this page, before I began,  
may the same be said about tomorrow.

*Steven Walker*



Picture: **Circle of Friends** by Emily Ann Foreman

## Inspired by Trials

When disrespect is present . . .

one is reaching into the portals of hell

When lying and cheating are present,

one is consciously destroying joy and peace.

When hell is present in one's home,

in one's thoughts,

in one's heart,

All good things, all wonderful things are being drawn away.

When hell is present, one can kill the most

innocent of feelings.

The most precious and innocent of human beings, the most

precious of life . . .

Finally all will suffer and die in anguish . . .

die in pain, and then—

Satan will rejoice. Oh what Pain

And Strife

And Dumb

Anguish We

Bring to One Another.

*Sandra A. Kearsse*

## **On the Way Home . . .**

Over the hills, around the curves  
many miles away  
too many hours away  
far away  
this road takes me  
past the farms  
past the corn fields  
past the wheat fields  
past the pastures where the cows graze  
this road is leading me to a place  
where my spirit soars over the hills  
and my soul finds sweet serenity  
nestled in that tranquil sanctuary  
many miles away  
too many hours away  
far away  
I find peace  
on the way home.

*Lisa Mcdaniel*



## **The Submariner**

In the depths of Poseidon's midnight realm,  
One hundred men wait inside a metal shield  
Silently, they stand a secret vigil—  
Hidden from the Sun's watchful eye.

Far away from friends and family,  
Each passing second echoes endlessly in their minds.

Two Weeks.

One Month.

Half a Year.

Time Stops—life is placed on hold.

Thoughts and air recycled; why or where is never told.

Man against man,

Men against metal,

One ship, one goal.

Caged but somewhat free,

Waiting to see the sun again.

Silently they stalk and think.

*Mouin N. Sayegh, Jr.*

## **Those Vague Gray Eyes**

Those vague gray eyes conveyed a world of emotion,  
In a single glance,  
In one sprite look,  
A chaotic earth  
of anger and ecstasy.  
Her eyes a tunnel to her soul.

*John Ferrer*

## **Pieces of Me**

Daily I dispense pieces of me, curious as to who would accept.  
And daily I gather those pieces  
That lie dejected at the foot of each nameless number.  
My meager hope is that one piece may be absorbed and cherished.  
An ocean of denial is worth a teardrop of acceptance.

*John Ferrer*

## **Resistance**

Every morning I –  
Watching the sun  
Rise over the lake –  
Resist you.

I see your soul in your eyes  
Flashing pain  
While I say something . . .  
. . . offensive, hurtful, wrong?

You are in your art,  
Diffused.

I gather your light  
Throughout your works,

And every evening you –  
While I'm sleeping,  
Dreaming –  
Replenish my heart.

*Sherry Yearty*

## Lost

Sometimes I wish that I could go back in time. I wish that things could be simple, and that the so-called life or death decisions could be as uncomplicated and clear-cut as they once were. Now though, the time passes faster, lazy days in the sun no longer exist. They are gone along with nap time, recess, and afternoon snacks. I often dream of those things, and yearn for them to reclaim a part of my existence.

As I wake to the cries of a screaming child in the middle of the night, pulling me, unwillingly from my few moments of slumber, I wish that I could be that baby. I would like to once again be the one screaming out in the middle of the night, pulling my mother from her bed. I wonder if she hated my cries, or if she loved to hear them. They say that a mother always loves to hear her baby. I guess that I am not, in that sense, a mother. I know that I am not. I am still a child. A child who made a foolish mistake that thrust her forward into adulthood, like a baby bird flung from its nest. Only, I did not fly. I fell from my warm, safe surroundings onto the rock-hard ground. I was not comforted, or encouraged like the bird, but greeted by the demanding wails of a small little child, insisting that I give it my undivided attention. No one paid me any mind at all, except for the scornful looks that the elderly ladies would give me as I walked to and from the grocery store, in the bitter cold, carrying the screaming bundle. I wanted so badly—more than anything else I had ever wanted—to be that baby.

I dream often—one of those very realistic, unsettling dreams—that I am a baby lying alone in a small cage surrounded by nothing but darkness. I scream out, as loudly as I can, until I see someone coming. Then I realize that it is myself, and I begin to cry even more. I always awake from these dreams sweaty, hot and panic-stricken, wishing that I could be someone else entirely. I wish that my mother were there to comfort me in my distress, but she is no longer there; she will never be there again. I call out in my mind for her to run to me, to please comfort me in some way. But I can hear her words as if she were actually right there saying them to me. The words, harsh and scornful, as always, “It’s your mistake. You *chose* to go against everything that we have worked so hard to teach you. I’m washing my hands of you. It’s your problem now. We even gave you a choice, and you insisted on keeping that child. Now you must live with it.”

These words haunt me every day of my life. I can feel the hot water rising up out of my eyes as I remember those words, “I’m washing my hands of you.” My mother has abandoned me, but her words never will.

*Julie Anne Gorney*

## **As the Sun Reached Its Highest Point**

As the sun reached its highest point that day, everything stood still. The slight ripples in the water reflected back upon my face. I knelt down to take a drink, and I saw myself.

I knelt there for hours studying my own reflection. I noticed thin wrinkles below my eyes and around my mouth. I noticed a vein protruding from the side of my head. Then, I noticed something more important: an expression of uncertainty.

Suddenly, as a small undefined ripple drifted aside, it caught a beam of the sun and sent it directly into my eyes. Then, again I looked at myself.

I saw who I am. I saw everything I once wanted to be, but now I pray I never become. I saw what I long to be, but cannot seem to reach.

Slowly, the sun moved aside and vanished behind a cloud of gray. My path became shady and almost invisible. I looked behind me and buckled as I realized the day's significance.

*Kyle Stanley*

## Thoughts From Disrupted Sleep

Disturbed,  
Tossing  
Turning through  
The night.  
Weary yet restless  
Dreaming of me.  
This is how I hope you feel  
As I lay  
Alone  
Awake  
With a love so  
Unrequited  
That I  
Toss and  
Turn throughout  
The night  
Dreaming of you.

*Katrina Helton*



Picture: **Aged Youth** by Lili Gresham



## Enlightenment

In the snake  
On the asphalt path –  
Waiting

She in sheer sausage skins  
He in silk noose.

Partitioned senses  
Windowless purposes

Large eye anticipating  
Teeth chattering fingers

Our-way-  
Or-the highway thoughts.

Creativity must die  
For you to live

In this darkness  
Of Enlightenment.

*Sherry Yearty*

## Lessons of the Proverbial Heart

Like rats in a maze  
we wander through life,  
turning each corner  
on instinct and blind faith.  
There are no previews,  
but they say hindsight  
is twenty-twenty.  
So, why does the sequel  
always get bad reviews?

Just as an old sweater  
worn over and over  
eventually wears  
out,  
the heart that continues to  
love over and over  
will unravel.

We continue to wear them  
because of the warmth,  
the security,  
but a frayed sweater  
can be mended,  
a broken heart shatters  
like glass reflecting  
in a million pieces,  
eventually becoming numb,  
only occasional twinges.

*Heather Pipkin*

## Recapture Me

I pray you, sir, stand a moment. Do not be too hasty to rush off. I will not say that I am over glad to see you, for it has been my purpose these two score years to avoid all intercourse with men, yet there is that within me which yearns to make my story known. Therefore, stay a moment, and perhaps you will hear something worth the telling. That log which you find behind you will bear your weight, though you may not find it as comforting as those chairs of the East.

The summer of 1806, I received word that the South Carolina State Legislature was considering a measure which would allow again that awful traffic in human flesh which had once reflected so poorly in our Southern neighbors. My uncle John Townsend being a member of that body, I resolved to hazard the journey that I might attempt to persuade him to cast his influential vote against this measure. Alas, through bad weather, and perhaps fate, I arrived too late to affect the outcome. In a word, my uncle and his fellow representatives had cast their votes in favor of that barbarous act.

I need not tell you that I was wroth, not only with the outcome of the vote, but also with that normal anger which must always accompany unforeseen delays when one is in a great hurry. Charleston had a great many comforts which I could have taken to assuage my humor, but a man's anger, once ignited, is loath to cool. For this reason I betook me to travel to Sullivan's Island that I might look at the poor wretches being unloaded from the ships which had lain anchored just off the coast awaiting the vote. I will not trouble you with the details of their appearance after being held in a ship's hold for weeks. Nor will I trouble you with my speeches made to the persons there. I will only say that my words made me unwelcome there, and I found it necessary to depart the island.

My wrath being suitably increased from this exercise, I resolved to return to the room I had taken in a set of apartments on Union Street, resolved to go out on the morrow to observe the next step of this traffic in human flesh. Accordingly, the next day I set out to Mulatto Street to Ryan's Mart where a great crowd had gathered to bid on those in bondage. I had great occasion afterwards to ponder the worth of a man. Had those which were bidding been put in their turn on the block, I would not have given a continental for one; no, not for the whole crowd, laughing and besporting themselves as I am sure did those denizens of Pandemonium.

I did not think them worthy of inhabiting so great a world as we have. I must not here fail to omit that I did not feel worthy to live on it either and so contribute to the squalor and filth that is humanity.

Peace, peace, sir. Do I not have the support of scripture? Did he not say, "All we like sheep have gone astray," and again, "There is no one who seeks after righteousness. No, not one."

Returning to my tale, it was there, as I gazed on that scene, that I made my resolution. I grew disgusted with books and learning and talked more with trappers than with those wise in useless knowledge. For what does it profit a man to know everything, if by so doing he loses what little of himself is good? I, therefore, felt it best to fear not ignorance of foolish human wisdom, but to fear losing that contact with Nature by which a man is purified.

All of that natural intelligence which had been endowed to me by my Mother I hastily applied to the learning of all the skill necessary for a man alone to withstand the rigors of the Natural State. Instead of Shakespeare I studied shelters, dead falls instead of Dante, plants instead of philosophy, and rope-making instead of rhetoric. My masters had taught me to study hard in order to gain reward, and in this one thing, it seemed, they had been correct. After three years of diligent study I judged myself ready for the task I had set for myself.

My grand journey, then, began on July 13, 1809. I booked passage on the *Lady of the Sea*, bound from Charleston to Norfolk. From there I made my way by coach to Nashville. Upon arrival I purchased a donkey (which I named Rousseau, Rosé when she was good, and other names when petulant) and those things which I felt I could not do without, though my original intention had been to eschew all things made by man's tainted hand. Among other things, I purchased:

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 2 | axes   |
| 2 | hatchets   |
| 1 | splitting wedge                                  |
| 1 | frying pan                                       |
| 1 | whet stone                                       |
| 1 | pair of sturdy shoes                             |
|   | good map and compass                             |
|   | pen and ink                                      |
|   | provender enough to last through the winter viz: |
|   | 30 pounds of meal                                |
|   | 1 pound of salt                                  |
|   | 25 pounds of bacon                               |
|   | 15 pounds of biscuit                             |
|   | 10 pounds of coffee                              |

You are right, sir. That was not coffee from the South American bean which you just drank. I grind the roots of baked dandelions, grind them, and brew my coffee in that fashion. You shall not offend me with your opinions of the drink. I myself only became inured to it after four years of continuous consumption. I set out from Maryville intending never to return from whatever lonely place my feet led me.

My feet led me here. You may see in what humble circumstances I have lived ever since. Rude though my life may be, I possess in abundance that

which I wanted most. That is correct, sir, I value solitude. I am one of those for whom the grasping, provincial, bestial world in which men interact holds no attractions. Being frank—for thus I believe all men should be—that decrepit breeder of ignorance, organized religion, that the society of men attempted to force on me in order to silence my protests holds me to a life of seclusion, also. Hold. Hold, sir. Are you one of those, then, for whom religion is but the sum of certain deeds, of ceremony and change given to the poor? You make the clay more than the potter. Here, for a time, I tried with all my might to unite with the canvas and bring my entire focus on that small sphere that leant itself to the touch of my hand. Do you fancy my image? I have spent years in thought trying to weave the words to fit. I seem to have quite the mood for speech this day. But mood or no, I see that your cup is empty. I have a little beverage stowed away which I think you'll find more to your liking. Take this journal and read a bit from it while I brew some of the root of yonder tree, which is known as the sassafras. I would have your notion of my story when you have finished.

Day 192

It is an old story, as old as life itself, because it thrives on destruction. I must destroy some vegetable or mineral and incorporate it into my person in order to survive. Is it right for me to take life in order to sustain my own, especially when the life runs so swiftly and perfectly through the woods, a soft, feminine thing which, though suspicious of the life which wishes to destroy it, devour it, assimilate it, continues to placidly wrench life from the dark, rich earth, chewing it into more deer flesh?

Today I must begin to hunt. I must kill today to sustain myself or else renounce this natural condition.

It is done! Those weeks working with the bow, those long hours spent honing down the cedar, all worth the great pains. Let me set down the events while they are fresh, though my hand trembles with the passion.

I went to the place I had earlier chosen, being much frequented by a buck and having fresh scrapings. I notched an arrow to my bow and waited for what seemed an age.

The buck came into view. I began the dance.

It was a fine animal. It had taken much mastication of living plants to form that six point rack and reddish-brown—glowing copper in the fading light—flanks that suggested tightly coiled muscles, tensed for the spring. It will all serve me well, after I have properly flayed and dressed it—the flanks for winter clothes and lashings, the muscles for my table, the bones for needles, eating implements, and a thousand other uses of which I had to constantly remind myself in order to steel my nerve for that lifetaking which I knew was necessary, but which I agonize over even now, believing that I had no more right to its life than it had to mine. Finally, though, the will to survive that has

wound itself through my blood and bone and the blood of my fathers back to the first scorned all soft philosophy and bid me slay the beast.

Only a thin screen of foliage prevented my being seen by the deer. I remember it all with great vividness. The tail flapping nervously as it lifts its head to scan for the scent or sign of danger. The species' overwhelming desire for survival burning in its blood also, somehow knowing the danger without any physical evidence. Now is the time—now, before its heredity awakens fully and banishes all other instinct in flight. Now I pull back the bow and brace for one final, horrible second, knowing that the beauty I see before me will soon be extinguished and that my life will allow no other course. Now the arrow flies, and I fall to the ground, senseless, my heart echoing with its silent scream and the awful interval before the soft thump and its death throes mock the calm serenity of the forest primeval.

I feel flushed and slightly wobbly, recalling the intensity of my emotion. My head felt as if it would rise from the ground as Franklin must have done in Paris. I know now that the deer looked quite calm as it lay there, my arrow rising from its flank. In my mind, though, the place reeked of its blood and fear. Again I fell to the ground, my meal leaving me this time. I then thought to give thanks to Nature for providing the flesh for me to eat, exulting in my ability to overcome the dictates of a defunct religion, weeping like a woman in the joy and the ecstasy of providing it, reveling in the blood which now covered my hands more thoroughly than Pilate's. I quickly made two nearby branches into a rough carrier for the venison, and, loading on my freight, I grasped the ends and began to pull it home, where I had all necessary things for the dressing of my meat and the obtaining of those other things necessary for my comfort.

Dragging my burden, I passed into the gathering gloom of the woods.

I shall write of the forest at night, for it is a wonderful place, delightful in all its ways. I could not help but adopt a solemn attitude and tread more softly than I did when in the clearing. I immediately felt cooler, more from the darkness collected under the trees than from any change in temperature. All about my camp, great, monstrous chestnut trees rise, seeming sometimes to wish me well and sometimes ill. That other giant of the forest—the tulip poplar, with its white trunk and sweet blossom—always seems to be an ally. And glad I am of that, for many specimens there are which measure not less than five and twenty feet of circumference. A slight breeze was blowing, drying sweat and fatigue from my brow. Even now, I feel like singing! A hymn of praise to this mighty forest which has such sway over my emotion. I feel powerful, dangerous—who among the soft, womanly men in the East would dare stride through such a wilderness in the day, let alone at night when those things which are older than man have their dominion. Even the thought of that Noble Savage, whose marks I have recently found in the valley below, leaves me undaunted. Look at me! I am a man! I live and move and have my being, woven into the fabric of this dark benighted forest, a god with feet astride two worlds, one covered with



blood and the other silk; soon, though, the silk shall fade and I shall stand as one in song, eyes fierce and blazing, feet planted apart, and voice lifted to those heavens whose gods do not attempt to hide how they amuse themselves at man's expense.

This thought amuses me greatly. Tomorrow, perhaps, I shall weave such a lay as I can with my poor, befuddled head while engaged in the grisly work which I have on my plate.

#### Day 193

The harvest is complete. The skin hangs, drying, stretched on my crude frame. The head I put in a creek to keep the brains from putrefaction. I plan to begin the tanning tomorrow evening after I make my fire.

What is important? I have proven myself fit to live so close to the throne of Nature! My thoughts run wildly as the dryads and nymphs, which true children of the forest I am sure will invite me to their feast tonight. I have found my meaning and purpose. Nature shall not fail me. She shall be more true to me than that circus put on by those of cloth.

Now, truly may I say to Jehovah, "You are not my God any longer!" My hand trembles with the weight of my words even as I become flushed and feel a surge of power run through my veins. That rush is my new master coming to my aid just as she did when I took the deer. Master designer of man and beast, Nature cares for her children far better than He ever did.

And now I make so bold as to write, "I have found a better one! She loves me, cares for me. When men come to her, they do not find the misery that your slaves have. They find peace. So leave me alone! Go away and lavish your cruelty on those who care to call on your Name."

#### Day 203

I have set my camp in the midst of a field, whose origin I do not know. Perhaps Chief Abram's people made it before leaving. I know not for sure. When I hit upon the spot, I chose it only because of its commanding view of the valley before. But now, with spring and the warmth of the good sun calling forth the buds of the bushes which surround my little glade, I discover to my delight what can only be William Bartram's "Flame Azalea." Aside from the name he gave to this extraordinary bush, no other description is needed, for one may well imagine the magnificence of a flower whose promulgation on a hillside would cause that great naturalist to remark that the hills were on fire.

#### Day 224

Time for thinking is not something I lack for. Many is the time that I have lost the strength in my arms and legs and slumped on my haunches, staring off into the forest. But it is not the forest that I am looking at; I gaze as one without wits at some time in the past, the future. My state is like unto sleep, a dreaming



languor, seeing something which someone else bids me see. What visions of men come to me hurts me even now to think on, so real that it makes me wince and come to myself all of a sudden. At such times I can feel the echo in the hollow of my soul. What can this mean, but that I was formerly so filled by this new passion that grows daily for Nature.

Day 226

No, I am not sorry I left Him behind. I ask, what had He ever done but give unto me such a depth and variety of Pain. While I was in the company of men, I heard from them a great deal of talk about His loving-kindness, about their willingness to do anything for Him. Talk I heard much of, and of great ceremony there was no end, but never did I see men running to Him with their hearts, wanting nothing more than to serve Him and their fellow man. Nay, the tombs showed plain enough. Taking what they could and leaving their brothers to what passed for Heaven's mercy, my fellows loved manna and hated man. But it was not men they saw when peeping out from those counting houses locked in iron. My fellow creatures saw only brutes which faintly resembled men; they were as apes or upright dogs or some other kind of beast that is no more than an annoyance, fit only to be kicked from the path. I thought that He ought to clean it up, damn us all to Hell, wipe the dish clean, and try something else.

I mean, I thought this before I came to know my true Mother and Her Truth—that She never meant man to live as he did, crowded like vermin into cities, away from the good land whence grew their virtue. This Truth is manifest everywhere about me. "The earth declares the glory of God"—Ha! This earth declares its own glory as it also lays bare the depravity of those who seek to desecrate it for gain. Reason thus leads us to Nature's door—imagine the fruits of knowledge which grow on Her tree, waiting only to be plucked by those bold enough to put aside a God of ignorance which forbade the knowledge, and wisely so, since true Knowledge would illumine His nakedness before the world. My mouth waters at the thought of that precious fruit, and constantly I plan new ways by which it may be obtained...

Day 298

... but I have given myself over wholly to that as would be considered the most filthy debauchery among civilized man. I have tasted the fruits of passion awakened by a release of all inhibition, that inhibition which kept my eyes from seeing the truth and taking the fruit. And it is sweet indeed. Very sweet. The taste of it has forever colored me, making it impossible for me to bear the chains of society and religion again.

My greed-filled grasping has been contracted so that my horizon might expand, my thoughts rippling outward from a selfish core to strike upon distant shores. I fancy that I might have made something of a man of letters had I tried

my hand at it.

Day 324

. . . I shall never go back. I have no desire to. Yet, surely there must be men, yea, must have been many men such as myself who saw the truth and took to the natural state. Could I enter into fruitful discourse with such men? I can not allow myself to be so arrogant as to suppose I alone possess wisdom obtained from the One. Perhaps they might lead me to a recognition of my error which gives rise to this yawning pit?

Day 331

I try. I try and try. What shall I say is wrong with me? Can this be the great failure at last? It gnaws at me. With what shall I answer this craving, this raving that sounds the depths of my soul and finds it empty? For I must have something to love. But I cannot love a tree. I wish it. Truly, I desire it with all my heart. But my brother the tree stands there and stirs no breath of feeling. It is a test. It is a test, and I shall not fail. My Mother has provided for me so often. I can do her this service—this least of services—to persevere in this trial. And still I find the labor strains me so.

Take and drink. The tea brewed of that root has many qualities of physic, thinning the blood and refreshing the body. I see that you have reached the end of my journal. I see also that you have in your mind a question. I have the answer, but it is such as I fear you would not take. No one takes it who is still seeking, believing that the toil will bear fruit. Come to me when you have given over finding the answer. Perhaps then we might speak further.

*David Hunter*

## I Think I'll Stay Home

I don't know, but I think I won't be a clerk at work today.  
My day won't be measured by a register.  
I'll hit that thing that ticks and kicks me out of slumber.  
That thing which would force me to lumber to the shower.  
I'll lie too long, then call and lie to him.  
I'll sit and watch the coffee drip and drip,  
Then sip and sip, and sit and sit.  
I'll listen to the wind whip the tin on the trailer.  
I won't nail her down today.  
I'll roam my narrow zone alone,  
Fiddling and piddling with nothing.  
My most important decision will involve the television,  
What to watch—besides the clock.  
I can't phone old friends  
Because their professions don't allow concessions  
Made for checkout chatter and caffeined confessions.  
They have to teach people and heal people  
And reach people in a crisis.  
They have to build towers and wield power  
And forecast tornadoes and spring showers.  
I don't know for sure, but I think  
They were the same when we were in school.  
"I can't stay home and go with you to the beach or pool."  
They thought they were wise to expand their comprehension  
With calculations, computations and exhortations.  
And look where it took them.  
I call in and another falls into my place.  
They call and order falls.  
Much is missed and has to be fixed upon their return.  
I don't know, but I think I would not like staying  
With all that playing with and weighing on my mind.

*Vicki Wilkerson Sweatman*

## The Muse

Must all draw near and reverently wait  
On that which speaks discernible whispers,  
Hovering arrogant over the gate,  
Mockingly beckoning all to enter  
Where persistence reigns indubitably,  
And guardedness earns incredulous spurn?  
Open up and surrender, poise to flee  
All that is known, choosing instead to turn  
Toward chasing whimsical winds, embracing  
Imbalance over probability  
And, cackling at the mocker, tracing  
Palpitating patterns on land and sea,  
Where nothing is and all things of value.  
Where knowledge fades and knowing claims its due.

*Sharon Dean*

## Easter Egg Hunt

Grandma watches them from the screened porch.  
Dressed in Sunday best,  
Children are running, dispersing,  
Frantically searching  
For delicate round treasures.

Pastel shells hide quiet in the grass.  
Unsuspecting legs run by several eggs,  
Careless eyes are too excited to see the disguised prize, and  
Impetuous feet crunch a concealed cholesterol treat.

Camcorders and Grandma watch and remember.  
The afternoon sun is warm.  
Lunch has settled.  
Grandma dozes off—  
Reclaiming the lost hour of sleep.

*Rachael Wiles*

## **Grandma's Reflection**

We were given nothing  
So we marched for what we wanted.  
Walked arm in arm as a band of brothers  
And sisters in Christ.  
Peacefully marching closer to our Savior and  
Our dream of a better life.  
Miles and miles of road ahead of us and a legacy  
Behind us.

Our movement was strong despite the obstacles  
That were put in our way. Barricades were set to  
Hinder our progress. We were marching towards God,  
No barricade could stop that.

Our feet ached walking upon that asphalt.  
Our heads baked under that Georgia sun making every  
Step a little unsteady.  
Our bodies were tired but our spirits were strong.  
God wanted us to keep moving.

*Chrystal Liferidge*

## Reality

I don't know if anyone will ever let me know,  
But I hope that all the oxygen I'm using up  
Isn't just for sitting in the dark and picking  
At my crusty old scabs, wondering why I'm here.  
Accidental love dying on a wave of nails  
Tossed on the beach and gasping for air.  
Swimming alone in a pool of tears spilling  
Salt in my mouth isn't what I had in mind,  
But dreams often lose their strength  
And Barbie doesn't live here anymore.

*Heather Klusendorf*

## 525,600 Minutes

It's nice to know that there are people  
Who measure a year  
In cigarettes, and oil changes.  
In mended shirts and trips to Wal-Mart.  
Here's to the prosaic life, it's yours to miss!  
Because permanent midnights of blackest ebony,  
Gently whispering waves,  
And piercing, waning, longing gazes  
Are fine things.  
If you can fit them  
Between the dirty laundry and overdue rent.

*Mandy Rudloff*



## Glory Days

A scattered mess of days  
Stand as a reminder  
Of how far, and deep, and cunning  
The sickness grows.  
One understands nothing  
Save for grave animal instincts  
Switching on and off  
Through one jerky step  
Followed by another.

The whirling wheels  
Of mental strain  
Waste time  
In the face  
Of decay.  
What was  
Will be no more.  
Where is gone  
To when.

Clear blue skies  
Blanketing clear  
Blue lakes  
Where trout  
Big as monsters  
Swim and spit  
Corn out.  
Banks rise high to heaven  
Where silence hangs in mists.  
The trees fan away heat,  
And bobbing corks  
Dip below the surface.

Cracked dry plains  
With palm trees  
Surrounded by gritty sand  
And dried out herring  
Stink with grease  
On burning flesh.  
Hipwaders are so  
Outdated.







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